St. Clair emerged from his reflections long enough to take note of the village through which they were passing. They were not much more than a few hours from Portsmouth, he judged. He would have enough time to visit a certain house he knew, hard by the harbor, where anything could be found for a price, including a wife.

A gesture to Ned brought the coach to a standstill long enough for him to move his chilled body inside for a respite from the wind. He stretched out as much as the cramped space would allow and groped in the dark for a blanket. His hand closed on a length of scratchy material and he gave a sharp tug.

“Mmm.”

Shocked into immobility by the low moan, St. Clair sat frozen, arm still outstretched, waiting with indrawn breath for the eerie sound to occur again.

“Mmm.”

*Gad, there it was again*. His pent-up breath came out in a long hiss of surprise as his hands touched the unmistakable outline of a human form. *Hellfire. Someone was in here with him. No ghostly spectre, either.* Cautiously he explored the body under his hands and cursed the inky blackness. He fumbled in his pocket for his flint, finally striking a wavering light on the third attempt. His mind registered a cloud of dark hair and a flash of white skin before burning fingers forced him to extinguish the flame and plunged him back into darkness. *Bloody hell, a woman*. He banged hard on the coach roof and the vehicle rolled to a halt.

“My lord?”

St. Clair jumped to the ground and unhooked a lantern from the side. “Give the reins to Dan and come down here, Ned,” he ordered. “You won’t believe this, but we have a stowaway. I’m not sure *I* believe it,” he muttered under his breath as he climbed back into the coach. Ned crowded in beside him, taking the lantern while St. Clair turned back the cloak partially covering the woman’s face.

“Hell’s bells, would you look at that?” Stunned, the two men stared at the stranger in the uncertain light.

“Looks to be hurt, she is, my lord,” Ned said after a long silence. “There’s blood on her. You see?”

“I see.” St. Clair spoke curtly, strangely moved at the sight of the pale, defenseless face. He folded back the cloak to further expose the red stain on her gown. He’d been right about the cloud of hair he could now see, and he smoothed back the tangled mass of black curls to touch the pulse at her throat. Slow, frighteningly slow, and her skin icy under his hand.

“She ain’t dead, is she, sir?” Ned questioned in a worried voice.

“No, she isn’t dead. Not yet. But she will be if she stays out in this cold much longer.” He frowned in concentration. “There is a small inn just a short distance off the main road, not far from here. Get the horses moving, Ned. We will stop there for help.”

St. Clair cradled the still form in his arms and tucked the blanket around her, surprised by the sense of protectiveness evoked by the feel of this helpless female resting against him. He found himself almost unable to move as he waited for each slow breath. *Who was she? How the devil did she come to be in his coach?* He doubted her presence was connected to his mission, known only to a handful of people, but the coach had arrived just a few hours ago and he found it difficult to believe chance had brought her here.